

Panel Says Sessions Tolerates F.B.I. Discrimination

By PHILIP SHENON

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WASHINGTON, April 5 — Members of Congress today accused the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, William S. Sessions, of tolerating what one lawmaker described as a "living hell" experienced by the bureau's black and Hispanic employees.

In a tense, often angry hearing before a House panel, Mr. Sessions denied the charge, insisting that "dozens of initiatives are in place and are working" to root out discrimination in the bureau.

"It is absolutely essential that the F.B.I. not be perceived as racist or discriminatory," he testified.

But several Democrats and one Republican on the panel, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, questioned whether the bureau, responsible for enforcing civil rights law, was blind to discrimination in its own ranks. The discrimination has been documented in court findings and internal investigations.

Promotions Are Questioned

Democrats on the panel expressed outrage that Mr. Sessions had promoted some of the white F.B.I. agents who are the targets of discrimination complaints brought by black and Hispanic agents.

"Working in the F.B.I. as a minority is a living hell," said Representative John Conyers Jr., a Michigan Democrat. He told Mr. Sessions, "What we're getting from you is essentially a stonewalling on this entire question."

Representative William E. Dannemeyer, a California Republican, said he was dismayed by recent allegations that the bureau had retaliated against Hispanic agents who won a landmark discrimination lawsuit against the bureau in 1988.

Recent evidence, Mr. Dannemeyer said, offers the "inference that somebody is being discriminated against" within the bureau.

Mr. Sessions met with little support in defending the bureau's treatment of its minority employees. None of the five lawmakers who joined today in questioning the F.B.I. Director expressed great confidence in his plans to overcome internal discrimination.

Last month, current and former Hispanic agents testified before the same panel, saying that their careers had been sabotaged by white supervisors who were angry over the verdict in the discrimination suit.

After a trial in El Paso on the suit, a Federal judge ruled in September 1988 that the F.B.I. had engaged in widespread discrimination against its Hispanic employees.

Lawmakers repeatedly questioned



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William S. Sessions, Director of the F.B.I., testifying before a House panel yesterday.

Mr. Sessions today about why, more than a year after the verdict, the F.B.I. had yet to punish any of the white supervisors who were identified by the Hispanic agents as their tormentors.

"There is absolutely no penalty on the supervisors: their life goes on as normal," said Representative Patricia Schroeder, a Colorado Democrat. "The appearance is very bad."

Mr. Sessions said internal investigators at the bureau were continuing to study the discrimination charges to determine whether disciplinary action should be taken against some of the white supervisors. And in the interim, he acknowledged, he has promoted a number of them.

"Allegations, accusations are not proof," Mr. Sessions testified, adding that "I'm not going to be presumptuous enough to stop a career in midstream before" the investigations of the white agents are completed.

Mr. Sessions faced his most hostile questioning from Representative Conyers, who suggested that the "Hoover legacy in the F.B.I." lingered on. J. Edgar Hoover for decades resisted hiring black, Hispanic and female agents in his tenure as Director.

"The fact of the matter is that we're moving far, far too slowly," Mr. Con-

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The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____

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yers said, his voice rising almost to a shout. "Why can't we put discrimination behind us? Who's above you? Who do we have to call in to get to the bottom of this?"

Sessions Tells of Step Taken

Mr. Sessions insisted that he shared Mr. Conyers' concerns.

"I would dispute very strongly that there is no movement, because it is strong and institutionalized," the F.B.I. Director said, noting that he had recently enlarged the bureau's career-development program for minority agents.

Mr. Conyers and other members of the panel said they were particularly disturbed by the bureau's treatment of a black agent, Donald Rochon, whose discrimination charges first drew national attention to racial harassment within the bureau.

Mr. Rochon brought suit against the bureau after an internal investigation upheld many of his charges of often brutal discrimination by white colleagues when he worked in the bureau's Omaha office.

The F.B.I. and its parent agency, the Justice Department, have refused to settle the discrimination suit, and lawyers for Mr. Rochon say the Government has ignored the damage done to the agent's career because of discrimination in the bureau.

The chairman of the subcommittee, Representative Don Edwards, a California Democrat, asked why the F.B.I. and the Justice Department had refused to settle the case.

As he has in the past, Mr. Sessions refused to discuss many details of the Rochon case because it is still in litigation. But he said of the lawsuit, "I would also have preferred that it would long since have been disposed of."